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Alain Roux, *Le singe et le tigre : Mao, un destin chinois* (Monkey and tiger: Mao, a Chinese destiny)

Paris, Larousse 2009, 1127 pp.

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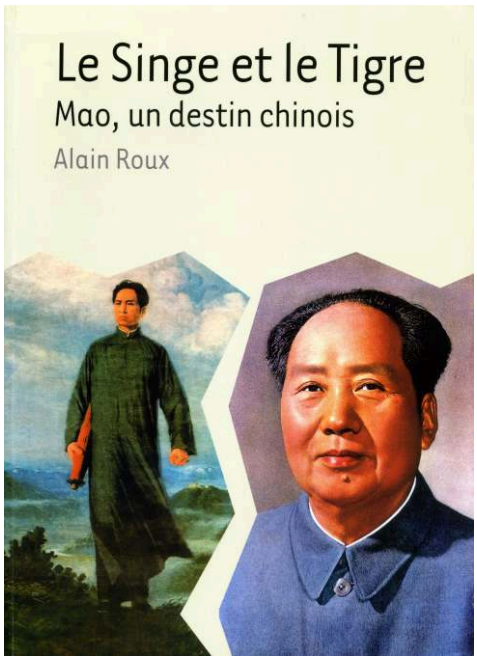
1 We now have a monumental biography of Mao in French: nearly 900 pages of text and 200 pages of notes ! And all this text is not only highly detailed, it is also reliable, generally accurate, and always impartial. Right in the introduction (p. 9), Alain Roux tells the reader that the author of a biography ought to feel some empathy for his subject. Most gratifyingly, this empathy is manifested especially, and most discreetly, at the very end of the book, following a long display of professional rigour, just when the man behind the biographer was required to speak his mind. Throughout the book, Roux does not spare Mao, and rightly so. He tries to understand Mao and explain his motivations, but then arrives at objective conclusions: the verdict is measured and well argued. Roux's conclusion: Mao was no crude tyrant, but a utopian who sought to do good to people, without asking for their opinion. As Mao never doubted his illusions and failed to admit his faults, he ended up causing genuine disaster. Thanks to the Leninist system that conferred absolute power to the top leader,



China had to wait until his death for its people's renaissance... and for the Chinese revolution to rebound, albeit by rejecting its tenets.

2 The detailed table of contents (pp. 1116-1127) facilitates browsing a given passage to check up on an event, a theme or even just a date, not only in Mao's life but also in the history of Chinese communism and of the People's Republic until 1976. There are three major phases: the adolescent and young rebel up until Jinggangshan (late 1927) ; the revolutionary (1927-1945) ; and finally the despot (1945-1976). Placing the second major break at the end of the Second World War rather than 1949 does not trouble me, as Mao enjoyed despotic power at Yan'an right from the early 1940s. The last two parts begin (pp. 221-222 and 484) with a clear résumé of the stages to follow. Also, at the start of some chapters (such as Chapter 9, p. 384, Chapter 12, p. 534, and Chapter 13, p. 597), one or two illuminating pages of material announce the major themes developed in the 50 or so pages to follow. But sometimes it is the conclusion that captures the essence with vigour (as, for instance, in Chapter 6, p. 275): "In the space of three years (from Jinggangshan to the bloody repression of the Futian mutiny), there came about the transformation of an intellectual engaged in politics to liberate the oppressed and deliver his country from the oppression of great powers, into a wily and cruel warlord who held that the end justified the means."

3 I cannot resist noting the rich anthology of Mao's quotations, some well known and others pure finds. In 1919 he wrote in his diary: "There is an extremist party of violence... The head of this party is a certain Marx, born in Germany" (p. 70). The following year, he converted to federalism: the Hunan republic was "the only formula for saving China" (p. 86) ; but this did not prevent him from declaring three years later: "We are still opposed to a federation of autonomous provinces" (p. 130). It was the first attack of political amnesia, Roux observes sagely. The nationalist-turned-federalist and then disciplined communist militant was hiding his brutal metamorphosis. Another contradiction within a few years' gap, attributable less to Party diktat than to experience and personal reflection: in 1930, he warned against the declassed (Marx's *Lumpenproletariat*) – "dangerous men, ready to sell themselves to the ruling classes," even though he had counted on their military prowess and revolutionary capacity in the famous "Analysis of classes in rural society" in 1926 (pp. 264-65). There were more contradictions, and more disastrous ones, as at the height of the Great Leap ravages (pp. 643-45 and *passim*), when strokes of lucidity punctuated the illusions to which he clung to the detriment of tens of millions of famine victims. Roux rightly diagnoses that when the famine turned more serious between 1959 and 1961, Mao turned a blind eye (p. 675) despite being warned in September 1958 that 500 people had starved to death in northern Anhui (pp. 640-41).

4 This is a recurring enigma: the same man who could see more clearly than his comrades and colleagues in so many situations was subject to aberrations that could have been avoided with a modicum of good sense, doubt, or modesty. It is tempting to conclude that his qualities (and not just his intrigues and ruses) helped impose him as chief and that it would have been better for just about any pragmatist short on ideas to have been at the rudder than this crank installed as Great Helmsman. One note of caution, though: absolute power would have driven astray the most solid of pragmatists. Moreover, peasant strategy was his, as was the early realisation of the necessity of having an army (pp. 194-95), the creation of autonomous regional bases, or even the egoistic and fecund decision to go easy in fighting the Japanese so as to

conserve forces for a decisive settling of scores with the Kuomintang. And it was the patriot Peng Dehuai who launched the Hundred Regiments Offensive (August 1940) at the risk of provoking a disastrous Japanese counter-offensive (pp. 416-17). As for the unending series of disasters Mao incited from 1955 to 1976, I will spare the reader the list here.

5 What comes as no mystery, however, was that he was allowed to get away with it. That Mao counted on mass enthusiasm (which Lenin and Stalin avoided taking for granted) in order to attain the unrealistic objectives he fixed (pp. 561 and 577-78), all the while brutally suppressing their aspirations ("the peasants want freedom, we want socialism"), is of a piece with the contradictions in his personality. However, for the oligarchs' shameful rallying behind the omnipotent chief, for their removal of the last vestiges of opposition to his utopian ravages (at Nanning in January 1958, p. 622), or for their capitulation (the following year at Lushan, p. 667) in the ouster of Peng Dehuai, who was saying what they all were thinking, the blame can be laid at the door of "the system." In other words, Leninism accounted for it, with no need to incriminate Mao's idiosyncrasies. The system created the same pitfalls as in the Soviet Union in 1929-30: "Promotions of local and regional cadres for their political docility rather than their managerial competence or clarity were to begin as early as in mid-May (1958) to rival those seeking to rise faster and higher" (pp. 627-28). And this system also determined the manner in which major decisions were made: on 26 August 1967, between two and three in the morning (Mao's biological clock kept him awake much of the night), he dictated: "Wang Li [welcomed as a hero on return from Wuhan the previous month], Guan Feng, and Qi Benyu destroy the Cultural Revolution and are not good people" (p. 793). The source of all truth having been proclaimed, the rupture with radical Maoists (who failed to jettison his own teachings trumpeted from the rooftops the previous year) was complete, and the "Great People's Cultural Revolution" was to follow a much different course.

6 The system kept Mao in power despite his blunders and his blind and headstrong ways, but the incidental differences with Stalinism were his own. Roux has summarised them elegantly, concluding that it was the failure of the "populist variant of Soviet state-socialism" (p. 813).

7 My reservations, and I do have some, pertain not to the book's substance as such. A certain number of inaccuracies are to be found in the details, not in the whole: Peng Pai was not really of peasant origin as Mao was (Peng was from a very rich family of landlords) ; Mao could not have met Robert Payne at Yan'an in the spring of 1949, because he was not there then ; Peng Shuzhi's interviews with Chen Ying-hsiang, Claude Cadart, and myself were not conducted in 1983, the year of Peng's death, but in 1969 and 1970. Other inaccuracies concern the text: Mao could not have commented on 1 November 1919 over the suicide of a Miss Zhao, which occurred on the 14th ; after being arrested on 12 September 1927, Mao could not have rejoined his "troop" following a harassing march on 10 September ; Luo Ruiqing attempted suicide on 18 March 1966, as noted, but the treatment that caused the suicide could not have begun on 4 April. The contents of some paragraphs (as in pp. 499-502 and 786-89) have little to do with the preceding headings. Repetitions abound, and references are sometimes wrongly given or not given at all. It would have been better had endnotes been listed by chapter (there are 1,262 notes in the third part alone). As many as 12 notes attributed to Chapter 3 belong in fact to Chapter 2 (pp. 918-19), while Chapter 4 usurps 15 notes

from the previous chapter (pp. 927-28). The editor may be to blame for these minor errors and for some faulty transcriptions, spelling mistakes, and misprints (Freud for Friend on page 917).

8 While I might list minor errors and technical imperfections (largely made up for through exhaustive documentation), I would nevertheless prefer to consult Roux's book any time I need to verify some point of history of the PRC or figure out Mao's motives in a certain episode. It has emerged as one of those rare and indispensable books for practitioners of our discipline. The unsuspecting reader might risk being discouraged by the vast array of facts, but I must stress that the introductions to the various parts offer steady guidance.

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